

# **Weight Stigma, Social Justice, and Social Work Ethics**

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Development

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## Preamble

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. "Clients" is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems.

## Principles

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective:

- service
- social justice
- dignity and worth of the person
- importance of human relationships
- integrity
- competence.

## 1.01 Commitment to Clients

Social workers' primary responsibility is **to promote the well-being of clients**. In general, clients' interests are primary. However, social workers' responsibility to the larger society or specific legal obligations may on limited occasions supersede the loyalty owed clients, and clients should be so advised. (Examples include when a social worker is required by law to report that a client has abused a child or has threatened to harm self or others.)

## 1.02 Self-Determination

Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals. Social workers may limit clients' right to self-determination when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others.

## 1.03 Informed Consent

**(a) Social workers should provide services to clients only in the context of a professional relationship based, when appropriate, on valid informed consent. Social workers should use clear and understandable language to inform clients of the purpose of the services, risks related to the services, limits to services because of the requirements of a third-party payer, relevant costs, reasonable alternatives, clients' right to refuse or withdraw consent, and the time frame covered by the consent. Social workers should provide clients with an opportunity to ask questions.**

## 1.04 Competence

**(a) Social workers should provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience.**

**(b) Social workers should provide services in substantive areas or use intervention techniques or approaches that are new to them only after engaging in appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in those interventions or techniques.**

**(c) When generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps (including appropriate education, research, training, consultation, and supervision) to ensure the competence of their work and to **protect clients from harm.****



## 1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

(a) Social workers should **understand culture and its function in human behavior and society**, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.

(b) Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.

(c) Social workers should **obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression** with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.

## 1.12 Derogatory Language

Social workers should not use derogatory language in their written or verbal communications to or about clients. Social workers should use accurate and respectful language in all communications to and about clients.

## 2.03 Interdisciplinary Collaboration

**(a) Social workers who are members of an interdisciplinary team should participate in and contribute to decisions that affect the well-being of clients by drawing on the perspectives, values, and experiences of the social work profession. Professional and ethical obligations of the interdisciplinary team as a whole and of its individual members should be clearly established.**

**(b) Social workers for whom a team decision raises ethical concerns should attempt to resolve the disagreement through appropriate channels. If the disagreement cannot be resolved, social workers should pursue other avenues to address their concerns consistent with client well-being.**

#### 4.01 Competence

**(a) Social workers should accept responsibility or employment only on the basis of existing competence or the intention to acquire the necessary competence.**

**(b) Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature **and participate in continuing education** relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.**

**(c) Social workers should base practice on recognized knowledge, including **empirically based knowledge**, relevant to social work and social work ethics.**

## 4.02 Discrimination

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.

## 5.01 Integrity of the Profession

**(a) Social workers should work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice.**

**(b) Social workers should uphold and advance the values, ethics, knowledge, and mission of the profession. Social workers should protect, enhance, and improve the integrity of the profession through appropriate study and research, active discussion, and responsible criticism of the profession.**

**(c) Social workers should contribute time and professional expertise to activities that promote respect for the value, integrity, and competence of the social work profession.**

**These activities may include teaching, research, consultation, service, legislative testimony, presentations in the community, and participation in their professional organizations.**

**(d) Social workers should contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. Social workers should seek to contribute to the profession's literature and to share their knowledge at professional meetings and conferences.**

## 5.02 Evaluation and Research

**(a) Social workers should monitor and evaluate policies, the implementation of programs, and practice interventions.**

**(b) Social workers should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge.**

**(c) Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work and fully use evaluation and research evidence in their professional practice.**

## 6.01 Social Welfare

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and **should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.**



## 6.02 Public Participation

Social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public **in shaping social policies and institutions.**

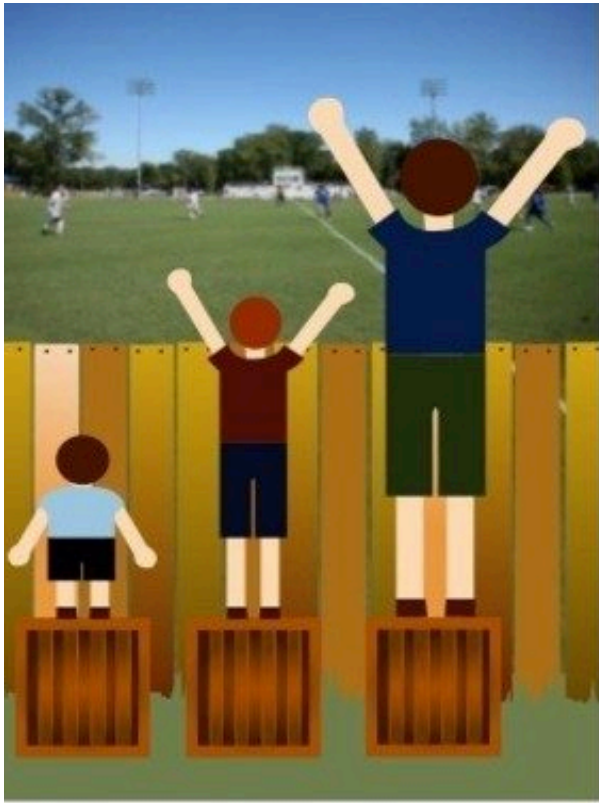
## 6.04 Social and Political Action

**(a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.**

**(b) Social workers should act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.**

**(c) Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and **confirm equity and social justice for all people.****

**(d) Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.**



**Equality**



**Equity**



**Justice**

Justice is removing the systematic barrier causing the inequity

# Social Justice

- Justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society
- The way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society
- Promoting tolerance, freedom, and equality for all people regardless of race, sex, orientation, national origin, handicap, etc.

# NASW definition of Social Justice

- “Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need.”
- “Indeed, from the beginning of their profession, social workers have been involved in “connecting the dots” between peace and social justice”

# The Social Work Dictionary

- “An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. Implicit in this concept is the notion that historical inequalities should be acknowledged and remedied through specific measures. A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression and instructional inequities.” p.405

# Prejudice

- preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience
- an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics
- the Latin *praejudicium* means "judgment in advance."
- Unreasonable dislike or distrust of someone different from you
- Implicit or explicit



# Stigma

- a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person
- a set of negative and often unfair beliefs
- a strong feeling of disapproval shared by others in society
- An association of disgrace or public disapproval with something, such as an action or condition

# Bias

- a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others
- prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair
- a strong inclination of the mind or a preconceived opinion about something or someone

# Stereotype

- An exaggerated belief about people based on their membership in a group
- Serves as justification for how they are treated
- Supported by the culture and the media
- Positive or negative

# Discrimination

- Any form of group-based negative treatment
- Preconceived negative treatment based on a person's membership in a certain group
- Other definitions specify that the harmful action is unjustified or represents some form of injustice
- Overt or subtle

# Oppression

- prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or control.
- the state of being subject to unjust treatment or control.
- mental pressure or distress.
- unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power
- Social oppression is the socially supported mistreatment and exploitation of a group of individuals. Social oppression is based on power dynamics, and an individual's social location in society

# Microaggression

- a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other nondominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype
- behaviors or statements that do not necessarily reflect malicious intent but which nevertheless can inflict insult or injury
- Insults, assaults, invalidations

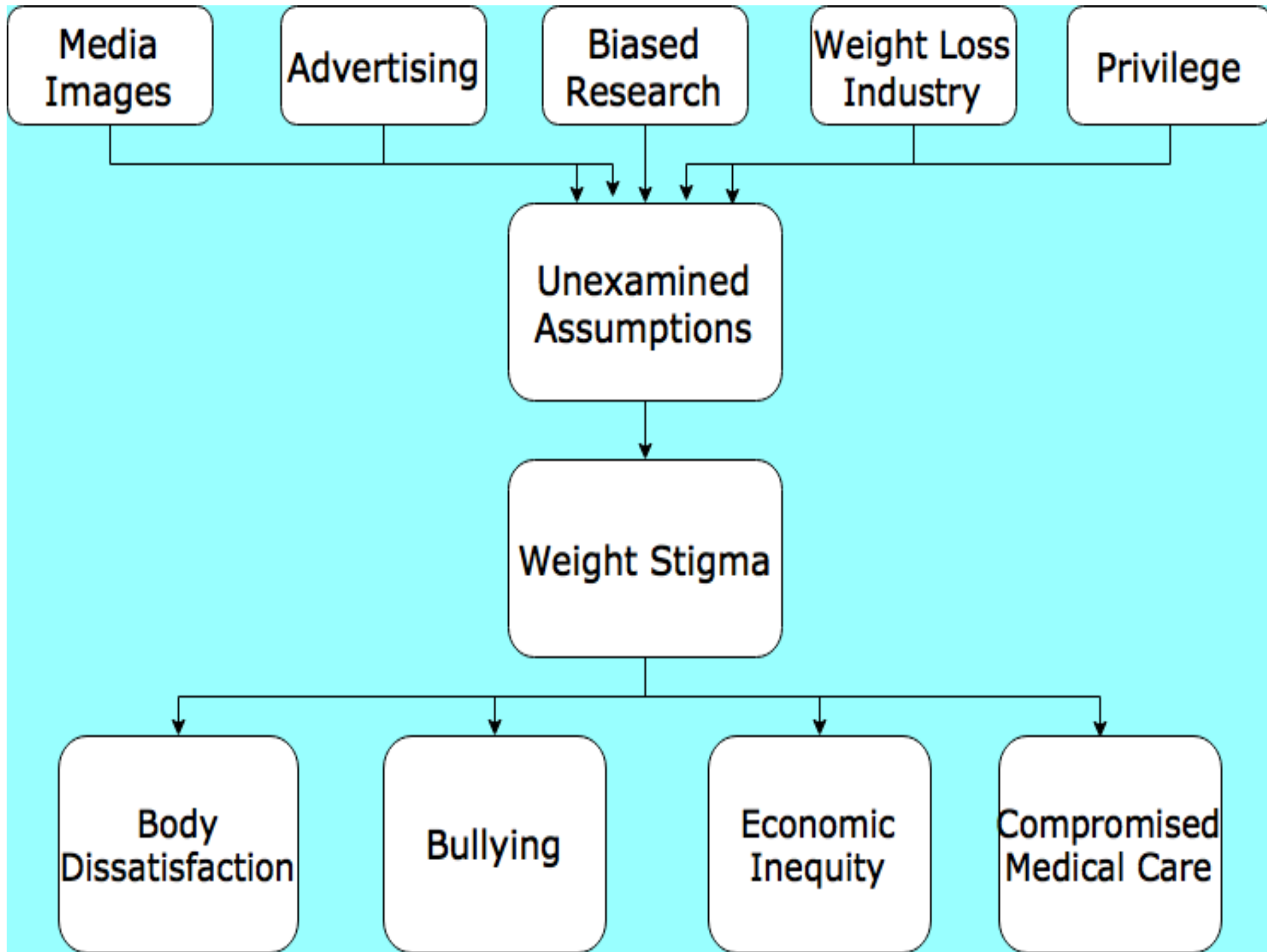
# Confirmation Bias

- The tendency to embrace information we agree with and reject information that challenges our beliefs
- Reflection of the influence of desire on our beliefs
- What do we *want* to be true?

# Saleebey, 1992

- "Biology's challenge to social work: Embodying the person-in-environment perspective"
- Goodness of fit – what adapts?
- Social workers strive for a more functional integration of mind and body nestled more firmly in social contexts
- We should not become, as helpers, part of the mechanics and metaphors of oppression





“A culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience. Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women’s history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one.”

Naomi Wolf, 1990

# Weight and Income

- Fatness and income are highly correlated
- Poverty may be fattening but a stronger case can be made that fatness is impoverishing
- Fat people are less likely to be hired, are paid less, more harshly disciplined and may be fired for not losing weight

## Brene Brown, *Women & Shame*, 2004

- "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging." p. 15
- the result of layered, conflicting and competing expectations based on rigid social and community expectations
- Fundamentalism is "any group espousing a belief system that holds itself so right and true that it discourages or even punishes questioning." p 114

# Policies focusing on healthy behaviors, not arbitrary weight

- Stop promoting weight loss diets
- Redirect resources from finding ideal diet to scientifically supported approaches to improving health
- Screen PSAs for stigma promotion
- Stop using BMI as health measure

## Policies continued

- Programs to trade in scales for BP monitors
- Slow elevators and make stairs easier to access
- Address school bullying, especially in PE
- Evaluate health education and promotion programs for unexamined assumptions and micro aggressions

# A social justice oriented view of health and well being

- Acceptance of body diversity rather than eliminating differences
- "Good health for everybody" while acknowledging social determinants
- "Well being solution" rather than a weight solution
- Promotion of wellness for all bodies

# A social justice oriented view of health and well being continued

- Interventions to reduce stigma and discrimination with both individuals and society
- Reframe stigma as discrimination rather than blame
- Focus on changing culture rather than changing bodies